

Message Text

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SUBJECT: MINISTER OF DEFENSE ANNOUNCES DETAILS OF MILITARY
SERVICE REFORMS

REF: BRUSSELS 5168; USDAO BRUSSELS IR 6 807 0319 73 (NOTAL)

SUMMARY: MOD VANDEN BOEYNANTS' PRESS CONFERENCE ON 11 SEP YIELD
RAMPLIFYING DETAILS OF THE GOVERNMENT'S PLAN TO MODIFY BELGIAN
CONSCRIPTION LAWS IN THE NEAR FUTURE IN ORDER TO ATTAIN BY 1978
A SIX MONTH PERIOD OF OBLIGATED SERVICE. END SUMMARY.

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1. HIGHLIGHTS OF THE PRESS CONFERENCE FOLLOW.

2. AFTER DISCUSSING BRIEFLY THE GOVERNMENT'S DEFENSE GOALS AND THE DEFENSE REFORMS ALREADY CARRIED OUT BY THE PRESENT GOVERNMENT, THE MOD ADDRESSED THE SUBJECT OF MILITARY SERVICE.

3. CERTAIN ASPECTS OF THE GOVERNMENT'S EARLIER (NOV '72) DEFENSE REFORM PLAN WERE MANIFESTLY UNPOPULAR AND NOT SUPPORTED BY THE NATION; ESPECIALLY, MODIFICATION OF THE DEFERMENT SYSTEM, IMPOSITION OF A "SOLIDARITY TAX" ON YOUNG MEN EXEMPTED FROM SERVICE TO ONE SON PER FAMILY. THE GOVERNMENTWHETHERFORE, IS ABANDONING THOSE ASPECTS OF THE PLAN WHILE RETAINING THE HIGHLY POPULAR OBJECTIVE OF DECREASING THE DURATION OF MILITARY SERVICE. THE MOD POINTED OUT, HOWEVER, THAT ANY SUCH DECREASE MUST BE OFFSET BY AN INCREASE IN THE NUMBER OF VOLUNTEERS FOR MILITARY SERVICE IN ORDER FOR BELGIUM TO RESPECT HER COMMITMENTS TO NATO.

4. THE MOD PLACED THESE NATO COMMITMENTS INTO TWO CATEGORIES: OPERATIONAL UNITS (REQUIRING WELLTRAINED FORCES), AND THOSE FXORCES RESPONSIBLE FOR CIVIL PROTECTION, LINES OF COMMUNICATION ANA SUPPORT (REQUIRING "FEWER QUALIFICATIONS AND, CONSEQUENTLY, MUCH LESS TRAINING.")

5. THE NEW GOVERNMENT SOLUTION CALLS FOR TWO STEPS: RE-STRUCTURE THE MANNING OF NATO-ASSIGNED OPERATIONAL UNITS ON THE BASIS OF INCREASED PROFESSIONALISM AND THE USE OF VOLUNTEERS; -RE-STRUCTURE THE MANNING OF THE GENERAL SUPPORT, GLOBAL (INTERIOR) DEFENSE AND OTHER NATIONAL-MISSION FORCES ON THE BASIS OF A HIGHER PERCENTAGE OF CONSCRIPTS SERVING A SIX-MONTH OBLIGATED SERVICE.

6. IT IS INTENDED TO IMPLEMENT THIS PLAN GRADUALLY OVER A 5-YEAR PERIOD SO THAT BY 1978:
-CONSCRIPTS, WITH RARE EXCEPTIONS, WILL NOT BE ASSIGNED TO NATO-COMMITTED OPERATIONAL UNITS;
-THE NUMBER OF SHORT-TERM (2-9YEAR) VOLUNTEERS WILL BE BROUGHT UP TO ABOUT 21,000 MEN, TO REPLACE PROGRESSIVELY THE CONSCRIPTS (IN OPERATIONAL UNITS);
-RESERVE OFFICER CANDIDATES WILL BE REQUIRED TO DO ELEVEN MONTHS OF SERVICE (VICE 12 OR 15) AND THAT SERVICE CAN BE EITHER UNCLASSIFIED

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CONSECUTIVE OR PERFORMED IN SHORT PERIODS DURING SCHOOL HOLIDAYS;
-RESERVE UNITS DESIGNATED TO BE NATO-COMMITTED WILL BE MAINTAINED AT STRENGTH DRAWING ONLY ON EX-VOLUNTEERS (AS OPPOSED TO THE 6-MONTH DRAFTEES).

7. IT IS ESTIMATED THAT ABOUT 6,000 VOLUNTEERS WILL BE REQUIRED EACH YEAR DURING THE 5-YEAR TRANSITION PERIOD TO ATTAIN THE DESIRED LEVEL, AFTER WHICH AN ANNUAL INPUT OF 3,000 VOLUNTEERS

SHOULD BE SUFFICIENT TO MAINTAIN THAT LEVEL. THE MOD GAVE RE-
CRUITING STATISTICS FROM 1951-1972 DESIGNED TO SHOW THAT IT SHOULD
BE PERFECTLY FEASIBLE TO ATTAIN THE NEEDED NUMBER OF
RECRUITS, ESPECIALLY SINCE ONE OF THE PROJECTED NEW LAWS WILL
PERMIT RECRUITING A NUMBER OF FEMALE VOLUNTEERS FOR NONCOMBAT
JOBS. (ONE PRESS REPORT PLACED THIS NUMBER AT ABOUT 300.)

8. ONE OF THE BY-PRODUCTS OF THIS PLAN TO RE-STRUCTURE THE ARMED
FORCES WILL BE A YOUNGER ARMY DUE TO THE INCREASED NUMBER OF
SHORT-TERM VOLUNTEERS AND THE ACCELERATED REPLACEMENT OF THOSE
VOLUNTEERS.

9. BUDGET CONSIDERATIONS: THE PLAN WILL REQUIRE AN ANNUAL
DEFENSE BUDGET INCREASE OF ABOUT 850 MILLION BELGIAN FRANCS. THE
MOD POINTED OUT THAT THE NEW PROPOSAL WOULD RELEASE 40,000 MEN
FOR SIX MONTHS (ANNUALLY) TO JOIN THE NATIONAL ECONOMIC ACTIVITY,
BRINGING ABOUT A GAIN CORRESPONDING TO APPROXIMATELY ONE-HALF
PER CENT OF THE GNP OR APPROXIMATELY SEVEN BILLION FRANCS.

10. THE REDUCTION IN TIME OF SERVICE WILL BE INCREMENTALLY
LOWERED SO AS NOT TO DISRUPT THE MANNING LEVELS OF THE BELGIAN
FORCES. THE GOVERNMENT WILL PRESENT A BILL TO PARLIAMENT DURING
THE 4TH QUARTER OF CY '73 WHICH WILL PERMIT THE KING TO REDUCE
THE PERIOD OF MILITARY SERVICE TO 6 MONTHS. THE GOVT WILL DECIDE
BY 30 JULY 1974 ON THE REDUCTION OF TIME OF SERVICE WHICH CAN BE
APPLIED TO THE CLASS OF 74; THIS WILL BE A FUNCTION OF THE
DEGREE OF SUCCESS IN ATTAINING VOLUNTEERS AND THE NUMBER OF
VACANCIES TO BE FILLED. THE SAME PROCEDURE WILL BE USED DURING
THE YEARS 1975-77 IN ORDER TO ARRIVE AT A 6-MONTH SERVICE BY 1978.

11. IN SUMMARY, THE MOD POINTED OUT THAT THE PLAN SHOULD LEAD TO
A CLEAR IMPROVEMENT IN THE POTENTIAL OF THE BELGIAN UNITS PLACED
AT THE DISPOSITION OF NATO SINCE THE VOLUNTEER PERSONNEL ASSIGNED
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WILL BE BETTER TRAINED THAN SCONSCRIPTS (THUS MORE OPERATIONAL)
AND THERE WILL BE MORE UNIT STABILITY.

12. NATO IS PRESENTLY BEING INFORMED OF THE PLAN AND CONSULTATIONS
WILL BE INITIATED IMMEDIATELY IN ACCORDANCE WITH ESTABLISHED
PROCEDURES.

13. EMBASSY COMMENTS BY SEP TEL.
STRAUSZ-HUPE

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